

RELIGION IN INDIAN HISTORY

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10 The Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā and its Influence in India

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Sadrud-dīn al-Shīrāzī, or Mullā Ṣadrā (1571–1640), is perhaps the singlemost important philosopher in the Muslim world in the last 400 years. The author of over 40 works, he was the central figure of the major revival of philosophy in Iran in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Devoting himself almost exclusively to metaphysics, he constructed a critical philosophy which brought together Peripatetic (*mashshā'i*), Illuminationist (*ishrāqī*) and Gnostic (*'irfān*) philosophy along with Shi'ite theology (*kalām*) within the compass of what he termed a 'metaphilosophy' or Transcendental Wisdom (*al-hikma al-muta'aliya*), the source of which lay in the Islamic revelation and the mystical experience of reality as existence. It was as a result of this philosophy that Mullā Ṣadrā came to be popularly known as *Sadr al-muta'allihīn* (the foremost of the transcendental philosophers).

In this paper an attempt is made to analyse the philosophy of this notable Shi'ite philosopher and the response which it received in India, where he came to be regarded both as a votary of reason and as a logician within the realm of Muslim theology.

Peripatetic (*mashshā'i*) philosophy (*hikma*) in the Islamic world had gained considerable importance between the ninth and twelfth centuries. The peripatetic system which came to have considerable significance within both Islamic and Western philosophy had been established by Ibn Sīna.¹ His book *Mantiq al-mashriqiyyīn* (*Logic of the Orientals*) not only deals with logical differences between him and Aristotle, but also includes a reference to other works of his own in which he claims to have gone in an entirely different direction from that of other peripatetic (*mashshā'i*) thinkers. A highly influential attack on the role of philosophy as part of Islam was subsequently carried out by al-Ghazali in his *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (*The Incoherence of the*

Philosophers). Al-Ghazali argued that the peripatetic philosophers (especially Ibn Sina) present as truths such theses as are either faith-denying (*kufi*) or innovatory (*bid'a*). In spite of his anti-philosophical leanings, closer inspection of many of his texts reveals that he himself continued to adhere to many of the leading principles of Ibn Sina's thought. Further, in common with many other opponents of philosophy, he had a high regard for logic (which was regarded as a tool of philosophy rather than as part of it) and insisted on the application of logic to organized thought about religion. Some opponents of philosophy such as Ibn Taymiyya went even so far as to criticize logic itself.² As a result of such criticisms, peripatetic philosophy went into a sharp decline in the Sunni world after the twelfth century. But it still continued as part of a variety of philosophical approaches among Shi'i circles, where it combined with elements of illuminationist (*ishrāqī*) philosophy, and developed into more and more complex theoretical systems.

The *Ishrāqī* school of philosophy originated with Shihabuddin Suhrawardi whose basic premise was that knowledge is available to man not through ratiocination alone, but through illumination resulting from the purification of one's inner being. He founded a school of philosophy which is mystical but not necessarily against logic or a limited use of reason. He criticized Aristotle and the Muslim Peripatetics on logical grounds, before setting out to expound the doctrine of *ishrāq*.³ This doctrine was based not on the refutation of logic, but on transcending its categories through an illuminationist knowledge based on immediacy and presence, or what Suhrawardi himself called 'knowledge by presence' (*al-'ilm al-huzūri*), in contrast to conceptual knowledge (*al-'ilm al-husūli*) which is the ordinary method of knowing based on concepts.⁴

It was these two trends that Mullā Ṣadrā tried to mix with the Shi'i *kalām*. Mullā Ṣadrā's metaphilosophy was based on existence (*wujūd*) as the sole constituent of reality; it rejected any role for quiddities (*māhiyya*) or essences in the external world. Existence was for him at once a single unity and an internally articulated, dynamic process, the unique source of both unity and diversity. From this fundamental starting point, Mullā Ṣadrā was able to find original solutions to many of the logical, metaphysical and theological difficulties which he had inherited from his predecessors.

Mullā Ṣadrā, as a student at Isfahan, had been taught by or

came under the influence of such thinkers as Mīr Muḥammad Bāqir Astarabādi (Mīr Dāmād), Shaikh Bahā'uddin Amulī (Shaikh Bahāi) and Mīr Abul Qāsim Findiriskī.⁵ The new school of theosophical Shi'ism founded by Ṣadrā, was partly a continuation of the 'School of Isfahan' founded by these three scholars.

Mīr Dāmād, whose poetic *nom de plume* was 'Ishrāq', is also referred to as the 'Third Master' (after Aristotle and al-Fārābī). He was recognized as a jurist, a mystic and a philosopher. However, it was principally as a philosopher that Mīr Dāmād distinguished himself.⁶ *Kitāb al-Qabasat* is Mīr Dāmād's most significant philosophical work, and it consists of ten *qabas* ('a spark of fire') and three conclusions.⁷ Its central theme is the creation of the world and the possibility of its extension from God.⁸ In it, Mīr Dāmād engaged in the age-old debate over the priority of 'essence' (*māhiyya*) over 'existence' (*wujūd*). He ultimately decided on the priority of essence, a position that was later fundamentally disputed by his distinguished pupil Mullā Ṣadrā.

Like Mīr Dāmād, Mīr Abul Qāsim Findiriskī, who had also taught Mullā Ṣadrā, was deeply influenced by the *mashshā'i* philosophy. He also wrote on 'irfān (gnosticism). He outlined a whole theory of visionary experience, which presupposes the idea of 'spiritual senses', the senses of 'ālam al-misāl which were later emphasized by Mullā Ṣadrā.⁹

In his major work *al-Hikma al-muta'āliya fi-l-asfār al-'aqliyya al-arba'a* (*The Transcendent Wisdom Concerning the Four Intellectual Journeys*), known popularly as *Asfār*, Mullā Ṣadrā confesses to the shift from his teachers' position:

In the earlier days I used to be a passionate defender of the thesis that the quiddities are the primary constituents of reality and existence is conceptual, until my Lord gave me spiritual guidance and let me see His demonstration. All of a sudden my spiritual eyes were opened and I saw with utmost clarity that the truth was just the contrary of what the philosophers in general had held. . . . As a result [I now hold that] the existences (*wujūdāt*) are primary realities, while the quiddities are the 'permanent archetypes' (*a'yān thābita*) that have never smelt the fragrance of existence.¹⁰

By taking the position of the primacy of existence, Mullā Ṣadrā was able to answer the objections of Ibn Rushd and the illuminationists by pointing out that existence is accidental to quiddity in the mind, in

so far as it is not a part of its essence. An implication of Mullā Ṣadrā's theory of reality and existence being identical is that existence is one but graded in intensity; to this he gave the name *tashkīk al-wujūd* (systematic ambiguity).¹¹

According to Ṣadrā, existence can be conceived of as a continual unfolding of existence, which is thus a single whole with a constantly evolving internal dynamic. Reality to him is ever-changing. The imagined 'essence' gives things their identities. It is only when crucial points are reached that one perceives this change and new essences are formed in our minds, although change has been continually going on. Due to this 'infinite diversification', the so-called realm of 'immutable essences' does not exist for Mullā Ṣadrā.¹² Time, in his view, is the measure of this process of renewal; it is not an independent entity where events take place. Rather, it is a dimension exactly like the three spatial dimensions – the physical world thus is a spatio-temporal continuum.

This theory permitted Mullā Ṣadrā to give an original solution to the problem of the eternity of the world which had continually pitted philosophers against theologians in Islam. In his system, the world is eternal as a continual process of the unfolding of existence, but since existence is in a constant state of flux due to its continuous substantial changes, every new manifestation of existence in the world emerges in time. The world, that is, every spatio-temporal event from the highest heaven downwards, is thus temporally originated, although, as a whole, the world is also eternal in the sense that it has no beginning or end, since time is not something existing independently within which the world in turn exists. Ṣadrā conceived of *hikma* (wisdom) as 'coming to know the essence of beings as they really are', or as 'a man's becoming an intellectual world corresponding to the objective world'. Philosophy and mysticism, *hikma* and Sufism, are for him two aspects of the same thing. To engage in philosophy without experiencing the truth of its content confines the philosopher to a world of essences and concepts, while mystical experience without the intellectual discipline of philosophy can lead only to an ineffable state of ecstasy. When the two go hand in hand, the mystical experience of reality becomes the intellectual content of philosophy.

The characteristic features, or rather objectives of Mullā Ṣadrā's 'transcendental philosophy' are thus described by James Morris:

[A] condition of intrinsic finality, completion, fulfillment, and inner peace (compatible with the most intensive activity); a unique sense of unity, wholeness, and communion (with no ultimate separation of subject and object); a distinctive suspension (or warping or extension) of our actual perceptions of time and space; where nature is involved, a vision of all being as essentially alive (in a way quite different from our usual distinction of animate and inanimate entities); a sense of profound inner freedom and liberation (or, negatively stated, the absence of anxiety, guilt or regret); a perception of universal, nonjudgmental love or compassion, extending to all beings; a paradoxical sense of 'ek-stasis', or standing beyond and encompassing the ongoing flow of particular events (including the actions of one's 'own' body).¹³

Ṣadrā appears to be a man 'fundamentally concerned both with the dialectical interplay between experience and transcendence, and a journey towards it, a journey which not just Muslims were making, but the whole of humanity'.¹⁴ He was not only the one who brought about a synthesis of traditional and rational knowledge and so was the most notable among the philosophers of the Shiraz school, but he was, in effect, a reviver of rational sciences. In the words of Nasr:

[Mullā Ṣadrā], by coordinating philosophy as inherited from the Greeks and interpreted by the Peripatetics and Illuminationists before him with the teachings of Islam in its exoteric and esoteric aspects . . . succeeded in putting Gnostic doctrines of Ibn 'Arabi in logical dress. He made purification of the soul a necessary basis and complement of the study of Hikmat, thereby bestowing on philosophy the practice of ritual and spiritual virtues which it had lost in the period of decadence of classical civilization. Finally, he succeeded in correlating the wisdom of the ancient Greek and Muslim sages and philosophers as interpreted esoterically with the inner meaning of the Qur'an.¹⁵

Ṣadrā laid the basis for what was effectively a new theosophical school of Shi'ism which combined within it elements of various existing systems to form a synthesis whose influence helped inspire renewed debates within Twelver Shi'ism.¹⁶

When Mullā Ṣadrā and the earlier generation of Iranian scholars were debating fundamental issues of philosophy in the manner we

have outlined, India had already experienced under Akbar (d. 1605), an official shift towards the patronage of the rational sciences at the expense of Muslim theology. It was prescribed that only such sciences as arithmetic, agriculture, household management, rules of governance, medicine, etc., should comprise the educational curriculum.¹⁷ There was a stress on reason ('*aql*') which was to be given precedence over traditionalism (*taqlīd*).¹⁸ This open stress on rationalism was in some respects remarkable for the time. The chief proponent of the rational attitude during this period was Abul Fazl.¹⁹ Among the two important functions which Abul Fazl assigns to a just ruler (*kār giya*), one is that such a sovereign 'shall not seek popular acclaim through opposing reason ('*aql*').²⁰ The large number of Persian Shi'ī emigrants to Akbar's India included physicians like Hakim Abul Fath Gilani along with his two brothers, Hakim Humam and Hakim Lutfullah, Hakim Ali, and a technologist like Shah Fathullah Shirazi, and the turn towards rationalism could probably have also owed a little to their arrival. We have the (admittedly late) testimony of Azad Bilgrami that it was Fathullah Shirazi who introduced the works of Iranian rationalist thinkers like Muhaqqiq Dawwani,²¹ Mir Sadraddin, Mir Ghiyasuddin Mansur and Mirza Jan in India. He would not only himself teach these works but under his influence they were introduced in the curriculum of the seminaries of higher education.²² Most of these Shi'ī migrants, it appears, were the followers of the Akhbārī *fiqh* which was the most popular among the Shi'as in North India during the Mughal period.²³ This school rejected the legitimacy of independent legal reasoning and held that in the absence of the twelfth Imam, who was in occultation, state-related functions could not be carried out in his name by the clergy.²⁴

Conducive ground for the penetration of Iranian philosophical ideas might also have been prepared by the visit of Mullā Ṣadrā's teacher, Mir Findiriskī to India during the reign of Shahjahan.²⁵ Findiriskī (d. 1640–41), during his stay, is said to have been attracted to Indian Yogic practices and to have written *Muntakhab Jog*, an anthology of *Yoga Vashishtha*. He also wrote *Usūl al-fusūl*, a treatise on Hinduism which unfortunately does not survive. He was the most notable intellectual link between the tradition of Islamic philosophy of Iran and the movement for the translation of Sanskrit texts into Persian in India.²⁶

The legacy of the *ma'qūlāt* (reason) favoured during the reign

of Akbar was carried forward by such noted scholars as Abdus Salam Lahori, Abdus Salam Dewi, Shaikh Daniyal Chaurasi and ultimately, Mulla Qutbuddin Sihālwi, the father of Mulla Nizamuddin, the first rector of the Farangi Mahal seminary.²⁷ Another rationalist scholar in the Mughal court was Mulla Shafi'ai Yazdi Danishmand Khan, the employer of the famous François Bernier.

The *hikmat* traditions as they developed in Iran appear to have secured easy acceptance in the Mughal Empire during the reign of Shahjahan. An example can be given of Mulla Mahmud Faruqi of Jaunpur, a peripatetic scholar who had been a student of Mīr Dāmād at Shiraz. He was not only invited to the Mughal court but counted Prince Shah Shuja and Shaista Khan amongst his pupils.²⁸ A contemporary of Mullā Ṣadrā, he joined the Mughal court in 1640. Very soon, we find him taking part in a debate with Mulla Abdul Hakim Siyalkoti, a scholar who had written a number of glosses and commentaries on the works of Mulla Sharif Juzjani, Sa'duddin Taftazani and Mulla Jalaluddin Dawwani.²⁹

The author of *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* (c. 1653), during the same reign, records the names of two scholars who had obtained training in the philosophical traditions of Iran. Hakim Dastur of Isfahan received training under 'Mir Baqir Damad, Shaikh Bahauddin Muhammad, Mir Abul Qasim Findiriski and other such scholars of Shiraz'.³⁰ Another was Hakim Kamran who, he says, was addressed by Mir Findiriski as 'brother'.³¹ Settled in the regions of Lahore and Agra respectively, these scholars might have also come into contact with Ṣadrā's views which were creating a stir during the same period in Shiraz. Of the famous Sarmad, who probably arrived in India from Iran in early 1640s, it is distinctly stated by the same author, apparently on the basis of what Sarmad told him himself, that he had studied 'under the sages of Iran, such as Mullā Ṣadrā and Mīr Abu'l Qāsim Findiriski and others'.³² How much his turn to mysticism was influenced by their teaching should be an interesting theme to pursue.

Evidence for the transmission of Mullā Ṣadrā's ideas and his 'Transcendental Wisdom' and rationalism to India comes from what we learn about commentaries written on him in India. Mullā Nizamuddin Sihālwi (fl. 1700) of the Farangi Mahal tradition is credited with the formulation of the curriculum for instruction known as *Dars-i Nizāmi*.³³ It was designed to direct the student to the most difficult and comprehensive books on a subject, so that the pupil was

forced to think. This curriculum has been criticized for placing too much emphasis on the rational sciences. According to Robinson, it 'stipulates no specific bias and insists on no particular books'.³⁴

Mulla Nizamuddin wrote a commentary on Mullā Ṣadrā's *Sharh-i Hidāyat al-Hikma* (a book which expounds his transcendental philosophy) and introduced this work in his syllabus, the *dars-i nizāmi*.³⁵ This commentary is now popularly known as *Ṣadrā*. Within a few years of the compilation of Nizamuddin's work, Mulla Hasan Farangi Mahali (d. 1794–95), a famous logician of the same school of thought, wrote his own commentary on Mullā Ṣadrā's *Hikmat*, which was also taught in various Indian seminaries of the eighteenth century. Similarly, 'Alim Sandilvi Farangi Mahali, the founder of the Khairabad School, compiled his own commentary of Mullā Ṣadrā's *Hikmat*.³⁶ Mullā Ṣadrā appears to have been noticed by Shah Abdul Aziz Dihlavi as well. A commentary written by the Shah, *Sharh-i Mulla Sadra*, is preserved in the Maulana Azad Library, Aligarh.³⁷ The *Ṣadrā* was also introduced in the curriculum of the Shi'ī *madrasas* of Awadh and till as late as the 1960s formed part of the curriculum at *Sultān-ul Madāris*, a well-known Shi'ī seminary at Lucknow. It is, however, quite interesting to note that with the growing influence of the *Usūlī fiqh* after Dildar Ali Nasirabadi 'Ghufrānma'āb' (1753–1820), the influence of *Ṣadrā* in the Shi'ī seminaries in North India declined. According to the *Usūlis*, thinkers like Mullā Ṣadrā, who followed a mystical philosophy, were heretics.³⁸ Presently, Mullā Ṣadrā and his works are hardly known or remembered in either the Shi'ī or the Sunni institutions of North India.

It thus appears that within a few decades of the death of Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640), he began to receive notice from the scholarly circles in India and interest in his philosophy continued to be displayed at least up till the second half of the twentieth century. This shows that despite the conventional Shia–Sunni divide, India and Iran yet belonged to a largely common intellectual region. It is difficult, however, to get an answer to the question as to how far Ṣadrā's larger vision was integrated or adopted in Indo-Muslim thought – whether it was just noticed and docketed to be taught, or also endorsed fully in spirit.

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